

Meth Project founder wants funding help

By CAROLYNN BRIGHT - IR Staff Writer - 03/22/06

Software mogul Thomas Siebel is asking area residents to help him take up the charge against the spread of methamphetamine abuse in Montana communities.

"If (the Montana Meth Project) isn't important, let's kill it," Siebel told a crowd of about 425 people at a gathering sponsored by the Hometown Helena civic organization at the Helena Regional Airport Tuesday morning. "If it's important, help out."

While Siebel says he firmly believes the hard-hitting public awareness campaign he unveiled in September of 2005 has been effective in educating Montanans about meth, he says he can't continue the crusade on his own.

"This program needs to be taken over by (the people of) the state of Montana," Siebel told the group, adding that he invested more than \$5 million of his own money to the program in 2005, and plans to dedicate about the same amount in 2006. "These are your children."

Even as Siebel works to produce the second round of advertisements for television, radio, billboards and newspapers, he said a self-sustaining funding model needs to be developed.

While some people believe the most logical leap would be to shift financial responsibility for the anti-methamphetamine campaign to the state and federal governments, Siebel said he's unsure whether that would be the best move in the long run.

"I'm not certain government funding is the right answer," he said, explaining that the Montana Meth Project derives much of its impact from its edgy, graphic message.

"The risk is we don't want to turn this thing into a public agency," he said.

Siebel said it's unlikely the initial advertising campaign would ever have aired if it first had to receive the blessing of a governmental committee.

While research is still being conducted regarding the effectiveness of the media blitz, Siebel said preliminary findings indicate that the level of dialogue regarding methamphetamine has increased since the advertisements were introduced. In fact, he has fielded inquiries about the program from across the country.

"Our messages are getting through," he said, explaining that Montana youth recognize the images and plot lines associated with the Montana Meth Project — especially the unscripted radio advertisements that feature methamphetamine users talking about their addiction.

Siebel said he wanted to capitalize on the response to the radio spots by developing television commercials along the same lines. So he hired a documentary crew to visit Montana cities and film methamphetamine users in their element.

The result was commercials documenting the stories of a meth-using mother-to-be, and a father and son who shared an addiction.

“The reality was far too disturbing,” Siebel said, explaining that focus groups had a difficult time responding to those advertisements, or to be more exact, the people in them.

He said his target audience — people who have never used methamphetamine — couldn’t identify with a 30-year-old woman injecting meth into a vein in her neck.

So, Siebel said, it was back to the drawing board for his creative team. He anticipates introducing the new advertisements in the next couple of months. Siebel pointed out that a government agency that suffered that kind of financial setback would find itself under public fire, just underscoring his question about whether government support of the program would be beneficial.

Helena resident Jim Christnacht, who attended Tuesday’s event, said the advertisements aired in the first phase of Siebel’s effort enlightened him to the issues surrounding methamphetamine use in the community, and he came to the morning meeting to learn more about the situation.

“It scares me, what’s happening out there,” he said.

Twelve-year-old Alexis Olson said the Montana Meth Project advertisements scare her, too, but that’s a good thing.

“They’re really graphic, and kind of creepy,” she said. Olson said she attended Tuesday’s event with her mother because she wanted to find out more about Siebel and his work.

While Siebel acknowledged that maintaining the Montana Meth Project campaign at its current level will likely cost between \$5 million and \$6 million each year, he said Montana residents are already paying more than that to address the social problems that are the fallout of methamphetamine use.

“What we wanted to do is reduce the perceived benefit (of using methamphetamine), and increase the perceived risk,” Siebel said, explaining that citizens can pay to put a stop to meth either up front — with such a prevention campaign as the Montana Meth Project — or after the fact, through social programs and prisons.

A crew from ABC News was on hand for Tuesday’s town meeting, filming it for a future episode of ABC’s ‘Nightline.’

For more information on the Montana Meth Project, and how to contribute, visit www.montanameth.org, or go to www.notevenonce.com.